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Two TDSB academies coming to Etobicoke schools



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James S. Bell Junior Middle School students Nathalia Azille, 8, Rowed Yakhni, 9, William McKeon, 8, Grace Eaton, 8, and...

Tamara Shephard
Etobicoke Guardian

The Toronto District School Board is opening five new elementary academies in nine schools across the city this September, each with a focus it hopes will interest students to want to learn, Director of Education Chris Spence said this week.

Boys' Leadership Academy

The Elms Junior Middle School in Etobicoke

Girls' Leadership Academy

Highland Heights Junior Public School in Scarborough

Sports and Wellness Academies

James S. Bell Junior Middle School in Etobicoke

Carlton Village Junior and Senior Public School in York

Shoreham Public School in North York

Health and Wellness Academies

Rene Gordon Elementary School in North York

Donview Middle School in North York

Vocal Academies

Heather Heights Junior Public School in Scarborough

Ryerson Community School in downtown Toronto

Boys' leadership. Active and healthy lifestyles.

The Toronto District School Board (TDSB) has tapped two Etobicoke elementary schools to be among its new academies to open this September.

The Elms near Rexdale will house the board's boys' leadership academy in grades 4 to 6 next year while James S. Bell in Long Branch will become a school-wide sports and wellness academy.

In all, nine elementary schools across the city will become five new elementary academies. The board will launch an all-boys' and all-girls' program from grades 4 to 6, and two co-ed vocal music programs from grades 4 to 6. It will also give five elementary schools a new focus on health, wellness and sports.

The intent of the no-fee, no-audition specialty schools is to slow the board's declining enrolment and to engage struggling students.

"If we offer programming that interests young learners and ignites a passion inside them to want to learn, then I think we're going to see something special happen," Director of Education Chris Spence said Tuesday morning at Humberwood Downs Junior Middle Academy at the launch of online registration for the schools.

"I believe the biggest issue we face isn't necessarily underachievement, it's disengagement...so it's our hope students will want to come to school, that they will want to get involved and they'll want to help shape what their school day will look like because they'll want to be engaged."

Board officials will partner with colleges and universities to monitor the progress of the five academies at all nine schools.

The Elms Junior Middle School hosts its open house for its grades 4 to 6 boys' leadership academy on Wednesday, Feb. 1 at 7 p.m. at 45 Golfdown Dr. near Islington Avenue and Rexdale Boulevard.

The boys' leadership academy within The Elms Junior Middle School can accommodate 100 to 150 students and will likely grow by a grade a year until it incorporates grades 4 to 8, The Elms' vice-principal Nancy Lyons said.

It will likely attract enrolment from across the city.

Already, parents of children at the school, including those of boys in one of the school's all-boys' classes, are showing interest in the boys' leadership academy, Lyons said.

In September, The Elms launched several single-gender classes for both boys and girls, in addition to its co-ed classes, in grades 4 through 8.

"It's good. It helps us try out different teaching strategies to see what works better for girls or for boys," Lyons said of the single-gender classes. "I think the teachers find they can tailor a conversation a little more to the needs of their students. They find there's more focus from students."

New teachers will be hired for the boys' leadership academy, although not necessarily only men.

"We're really looking to get the best people for the job," Lyons said. "Certainly we know young men require male role models, so that will be a factor. But we also know that there are women who are very successful at meeting the needs of young men and that will also be a factor in our hiring."

Boys' leadership academy administrators will track the school's success by various measures.

"We want to make sure our students are successful academically," Lyons said. "We also want to make sure our students are responsible members of the community and to be providing leadership in the community. We want our students to also be critical thinkers, to make sure the program we provide is engaging for them so they are able to do that and so that they feel successful, as well."

James S. Bell hosts its sports and wellness academy open house for parents and students next Tuesday, Jan. 24 from 6:30 to 8 p.m. at the school at 90 Thirty-First St. The academy program is not intended to attract elite athletes, principal John Currie explained, noting the TDSB currently operates elite athlete programs.

"Our job here is to work with the students we have as well as new registrations and promote a healthy lifestyle. If they're members of teams or they're doing lunch-time sports or after-school clubs, that's wonderful. But our main job through the sports and wellness is setting them on the right path so they can lead a healthy lifestyle," Currie said.

"It's not rocket science. Everyone knows there is a huge problem out there with childhood obesity. There are a lot of scary predictions about where our health-care system is going to be in a few years. Anything we can do to guide children and get them on the right path, that's what sports and wellness is going to be all about."

Board officials approached Currie with the idea of the school becoming a sports and wellness academy after positive results from an unique experiment two years ago to install four treadmills and four stationary bikes in its behavioural class.

The class of eight boys works out for 20 minutes every morning before class work begins. That is in addition to the 180 minutes a week of physical activity all students receive.

"It has just been phenomenal. The teacher is an absolute star," Currie said of special education behavior teacher Dagny Gardiner. "The boys in the class bought right into this. We've had far fewer behaviour issues than we've ever had before. Dramatic decrease in suspensions; pre-treadmills that group amassed maybe 50 suspensions. Since the treadmills, we are under five suspensions. Huge increases in literacy and numeracy academically over the time. It has just been a win-win situation."

The unusual experiment at the Etobicoke elementary school is rooted in growing research. Currie mentioned Harvard Prof. John Ratey, who argues exercise does increase academic achievement. Currie bought the equipment after watching a television documentary about a Saskatoon teacher who put treadmills in her Grade 8 behavioural class.

Last year, Gardiner received a Premier's Award for Teaching Excellence in the new teacher category. She incorporates the exercise in all areas of her curriculum. The program expanded to include approximately 20 intermediate special education students who use the treadmills for 20 minutes, three times a week.

The academy will offer "less emphasis on traditional sports and competition and more on movement, team building, strategy and creative thinking," indicated the report from a May 2011 board officials' update.

The same report indicated sports and wellness and healthy lifestyles will be integrated into the entire school's curriculum.

Partnerships with sports facilities and organizations like Humber College, MasterCard Centre for Hockey Excellence arena and the future artificial turf dome at Lakeshore Collegiate Institute is intended to increase students' exposure to a range of physical activities.

The school has a double gymnasium. About 30 TDESAA (Toronto District Elementary School Athletic Association) regional and city championship sports banners hang from the ceiling for badminton and volleyball wins.

Currie expects the majority of new students will come from the school's catchment area in the Lakeshore.

After the academy launches this fall, Currie said he will be looking for measurable outcomes, including a positive impact on grades 3 and 6 standardized test scores, as well as report cards student-body wide.

Registration and information on parents' nights is online until mid-February at tdsb.on.ca/academies.

~ With files from Cynthia Reason

